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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine communication apprehension of job candidates evaluated in company assessment centers. It was hypothesized that (1) candidates' scores on interactive or oral communication activities would be more predictive of job success than would noninteractive activity scores, (2) there would be a negative correlation between interactive scores and communication apprehension scores, (3) communication apprehension scores would be a negative predictor of candidate qualification, and (4) raters would consider interactive exercises as more important in the hire/qualify decision. The sample consisted of 187 managerial-level personnel and law enforcement officials, whose communication requirements are similar to those of white collar workers and executives. Six organizations conducted the assessments independently and provided the researchers with the scores. Candidates also completed a communication apprehension measure. The results indicated that interactive scores were not significantly predictive of the hire/qualify decision, and that communication apprehension was not a negative predictor of this decision. As hypothesized, communication apprehension scores were inversely correlated with interactive scores, and such exercises were ranked as more important than noninteractive exercises in the hire/qualify decision. The results indicate the importance of communication apprehension as a potential measure in job assessment centers. (HTH)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF ORAL COMMUNICATION TO THE MANAGERIAL FUNCTION: THE MEASURE OF COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION AND RATER PERCEPTIONS IN ASSESSMENT CENTERS

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ABSTRACT

Communication apprehension was measured in a field setting. A total of 187 candidates and 24 raters in six companies' assessment centers participated in the study. Two of the hypotheses were supported, pointing to the importance of the measure of oral communication in assessment centers for subsequent managerial effectiveness. Suggestions for adopting measuring instruments were made.

INTRODUCTION

The strength of assessment centers[1] for making personnel decisions has been shown through extensive research of the technique (Bray & Grant, 1966; Hardesty & Jones, 1968; Kraut & Scott, 1972) and continued use of the method by work organizations (Rice, 1978) since its inception during World War II (The OSS Assessment Staff, 1948; Vernon & Parry, 1949). Assessment center results have been used for making single time personnel decisions (e.g., selection, promotion), study of the phenomenon (e.g., Howard, 1974), as well as longitudinal studies following up on managerial predictions (Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974; Hinrichs, 1978).

Much of the assessment center research relies on test scores of managers and tests of employees for management-level positions. Since managers report the majority of their work day being spent in communication activities, and greater than half of that in oral communication (Klemmer & Snyder, 1972; Stewart, 1967), rigorous oral communication measures should be examined for their utility in assessment centers. However, the measure of oral communication seems to receive only perfunctory attention in assessment centers. Current measures of both oral and written communication emanate from exercises (e.g., decision

[1]The assessment center is operationally defined as ". . . multiple assessment procedures to identify, select, and develop managerial personnel" (Huck, 1973).

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game, case study) and appear as one of many dimensions. Communication is neither given special attention nor rigorously measured separately.

Research has focused on candidates' composite test scores with only a handful of studies examining rater decision making (e.g., Sackett & Wilson, 1982; Sawyer, 1966). With the strength of assessment centers being the measure of skills on simulated job functions, it may be anticipated that raters perceive certain job skills, and therefore exercises, more importantly than others for candidate (and subsequently, employee) success. These perceptions may influence raters' attention to and ratings of candidates during particular exercises. This study, in addition to studying candidates' exercise scores with attention to one communication measure (communication apprehension),[2] analyzes raters' perceptions of the importance of the types of exercises administered in assessment centers as used for predictions of successful job performance.

Four hypotheses are advanced. The first examines the predictive ability for hired/qualified candidates.[3] It was predicted that candidates' scores on interactive exercises (those requiring oral communication, such as leaderless group discussion) would be a more important predictor than scores on noninteractive exercises (those not requiring oral communication, e.g., in-basket). Second, a separate measure of communication--communication apprehension--was introduced into assessment centers to determine its effectiveness as an exercise. It was expected that communication apprehension scores would negatively correlate with interactive exercise scores. Third, it was predicted that communication apprehension would be a significant negative predictor of hired/qualified candidates (low communication apprehension scores are desirable since high scores denote high apprehension or anxiety toward communicating orally).[4] This hypothesis was based on the assumption that highly verbal candidates would receive higher scores on exercises requiring oral communication (e.g., decision game) than would subjects with high communication apprehension scores, who are, by definition, more reticent in their interactions. Finally, raters were asked to rank the importance of the exercises' impact on the hire/qualify decision. This was to test whether raters perceived interactive or noninteractive exercises as more important to the hire/qualify decision.

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[2]Communication apprehension "is defined as an individual's level of fear or anxiety with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78).

[3]Two organizations' assessment centers were conducted for the purpose of selection, hence the use of the "hire" term; one organization's purpose was for establishing a pool of candidates for future selection, and the term qualify was used; two organizations used the assessment center for promotion review; one organization used it for self-development of personnel.

[4]According the Scott, McCroskey, & Sheahan (1978), scores of more than 62 call for concern. Scores higher than 72 indicate a severe problem.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

The previous section overviewed the need and purpose of this study. This section will present the method and results.

Method

The sample consisted of managerial-level personnel and law enforcement officials, whose communication requirements are similar to white collar workers and executives (Cheatham & Erickson, 1974). Assessment center exercise scores of 187 subjects were collected from six organizations.[5] Each organization independently conducted its assessment center; thus they differed slightly from one another in procedure, tests, duration, and rater selection and function. The exercise scores were recorded by respective organizational personnel and given to this researcher. As a final exercise in each assessment center, candidates completed the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension--Organization Form (PRCA--OF) (Scott, McCroskey, & Sheahan, 1978). Raters (N = 24), after completing their required rating obligations, were asked to list the exercises as they perceived their order of importance for the hire/qualify decision.

Results

No significant correlation betweeen interactive and noninteractive exercise scores was found (r = .21, NS) for a sample of 36 (see Table I). Thus interactive and noninteractive exercise scores, being unrelated, could be examined independently.

Table I.

Correlation of Interactive and Noninteractive Exercise Scores and Communication Apprehension Scores and Interactive Exercise Scores

Variables	N	r	r^2
Interactive and Noninteractive Exercise Scores	36	.21	.04
Communication Apprehension and Interactive Exercise Scores	61	-.33*	.11

*p<.005, one-tailed

[5]The six organizations included: county government, city government, manufacturing, bus service, airline, utility.

Discriminant analysis was used to test the predictive ability for hired/qualified candidates based on their interactive exercise scores. Support was not found. Interactive exercise scores were far less strong predictors of the hire/qualify decision than were noninteractive exercise scores. Even with the noninteractive exercise scores the relationship was not statistically significant (Wilks' λ = .82, $F(1, 15) = 3.29$, $p < .09$). However, a trend may be discerned particularly noting the small sample size due to attrition for candidates with all scores (interactive, noninteractive, and communication apprehension) and either the hire or the qualify decision. Retesting with a larger sample size may demonstrate the utility of the use of the most desired skills (interactive, noninteractive, or specific skills such as leadership, for example) necessary for future job success.

As hypothesized, communication apprehension scores were inversely correlated with interactive exercise scores ($r = -.33$, $p < .005$) (see Table I) for a sample of 61. This low to moderate correlation in the predicted direction suggests the use of an independent measure of communication as an exercise in assessment centers.

Communication apprehension was not a significant negative predictor of hired/qualified candidates ($F(1, 15) = 1.34$, NS). The discriminant analysis statistic was applied again. As in hypothesis 1, the sample used in the analysis was greatly reduced; only nine subjects of the 187 had scores denoting high communication apprehension scores.

Finally, interactive exercises were ranked more important by raters than were noninteractive exercises for the hire/qualify decision ($\chi^2 = 11.59$, $p < .001$; $\lambda = .19$) (see Table II).

Table II.

Chi-square Table for Interactive and Non-interactive Exercise Rater Rankings

	Interactive Exercises	Noninteractive Exercises	Total
Importance			
High (ranks 1, 2, 3)	36	12	48
Low (rank 4 or greater)	27	32	59
Total	63	44	107

CONCLUSIONS

Although the present study does not find significance for all the hypotheses, it does introduce the importance of the measure of communication apprehension as a potential exercise in assessment centers. In addition, the finding that raters ranked interactive exercises as significantly more important than noninteractive exercises for the hire/qualify decision points to the necessity of communication abilities for assessment center candidate success, and subsequently success as employees on the job.

It must be pointed out that for the hypotheses using discriminate analysis, only 17 cases were eligible for these analyses (those with all scores and either the hire or qualify decision present). There were more noninteractive than interactive tests used in the six assessment centers. Two of the organizations (city government and bus service) used noninteractive exercises as screening tests. In these organizations, those candidates scoring below the criterion score on noninteractive exercises were eliminated from the remainder of the assessment center which ultimately included interactive as well as additional noninteractive exercises. This screening method partially explains the low number of subjects used in the analyses of these hypotheses. Three assessment centers did not result in either the hire or qualify decision.

In addition, only nine subjects (4.8% of the sample) had scores more than 62 on the PRCA--OF. Both hypotheses using discriminate analysis--one examining interactive exercise scores and the other analyzing communication apprehension scores--call for further testing with larger samples. Where noninteractive exercise scores showed a trend ($p < .09$) in the predictive ability for hired/qualified candidates, this may point to the usefulness of the most desired exercises being used as predictor variables (Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973) in assessment centers. The importance of noninteractive exercises must not be overshadowed by either interactive exercises or communication apprehension measures because of noninteractive exercises' contribution to the measurement of necessary job skills.

Two findings of the study point to the importance of communication apprehension scores and interactive exercise scores in making personnel decisions. The significant inverse correlation between communication apprehension scores and interactive exercise scores is consistent with the research showing the tendency for negative perceptions of peers of high communication apprehensives (McCroskey & Richmond, 1976). In this hypothesis where interactive exercise scores increased and communication apprehension scores decreased, consistent with McCroskey and Richmond, perceptions of high communication apprehensive candidates were negative, thereby resulting in low interactive exercise scores. The obverse would hold for low communication apprehensive candidates.

The significant correlation found for this hypothesis suggests the cautious use of communication apprehension measures as an exercise

in assessment centers. Until further research is conducted, it would be wise to utilize measures of communication apprehension along with interactive exercises to act as a measure independent of it while granting more information about oral communication behavior of candidates. However, some drawbacks in the communication apprehension measures themselves must be examined.

The most common method for measuring communication apprehension, both in general settings and in organizations, is a self-report survey (McCroskey, 1970; Scott et al., 1978). The assessment center setting, where candidates strive for the presentation of positive self-images, may result in more than average falsification on self-report questionnaires. Arguments against the use of other techniques, such as observation or physiological measures--for example, galvanic skin response--have been advanced (McCroskey, 1970), but not in assessment center settings. It is here where candidates are aware of being rated (observation by raters). Physiological measures would not be any more obtrusive in this setting, nor should their expense be a prohibiting consideration given the high expenditures inherent in conducting assessment centers (Jaffee, Bender, & Calvert, 1970).

The finding that interactive exercises were ranked more important by raters than were noninteractive exercises, for the hire/qualify decision is strong. The raters, being employees themselves, must be cognizant of the vital role played by oral communication in their daily work lives, albeit subliminally at worse; thus the raters recognize the importance of interactive exercises to successful job performance.

Even with the exceeding importance of oral communication to organizations, hiring/qualifying high communication apprehensives could be beneficial to both the organization and the candidate. The success rate for treatment of communication apprehension is high (McCroskey, 1972; McCroskey, Ralph, & Barrick, 1970; McCroskey & Richmond, 1980). It would be a far more costly investment for organizations to hire/qualify low communication apprehensive candidates who concurrently did not score well on other exercises. Skills necessary for the job are more difficult and expensive to teach a candidate than is providing treatment for communication apprehension. In other words, high communication apprehensives should not be excluded from employment. Rather, communication apprehension scores should aid in job placement for the individual. High communication apprehensive individuals would, in this case, be best placed in low communication-demanding positions.

Ideally, and in a pragmatic sense, organizations would do best to hire/qualify candidates with high interactive and noninteractive exercise scores and low communication apprehension scores. Where this is not possible, communication apprehension scores may be used to suggest treatment for those candidates who score as high communication apprehensives and who are otherwise skilled for the positions offered by the organizations (high interactive and noninteractive scores).

In sum, this study has focused on a separate measure of communication (communication apprehension) to determine its

effectiveness as an exercise in assessment centers. The measure of communication is called for, as explained by this study's results, because of the high reliance on oral communication skills for managerial-level positions (Klemmer & Snyder, 1972; Stewart, 1967). The reliability and various types of validity of the PRCA--OF (Scott et al., 1978) introduce this instrument as one viable measure for immediate use. With oral communication being so vital to the managerial function, more than perfunctory measure of it must be used in assessment centers. At this stage of the research the self report PRCA--OF may be one solution.

Finally, measures of rater decision making, while found to supply necessary information for this study, should be examined further for better understanding of the assessment center rating process. Raters' rating behaviors must be clearly understood to further the objectivity of the assessment center process.

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